Assessment Benefits and Barriers

Case Study 2

The Multi-State Collaborative for Learning Outcomes Assessment

The process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data can be daunting for any institution. When this is coupled with the limited sample sizes that are sometimes available at an individual institution, one possible solution is to partner with other institutions to share resources, increase sample size, and establish some external validity to measurements of student performance. The case study below describes a unique multi-institution and multi-state partnership to support learning outcomes assessment.

The Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment (MSC) was launched in 2012. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) convened sixteen potential partner states in Boulder, Colorado. Nine of these states – Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah – joined the MSC. A MSC Working Group with representatives from all nine states was formed to develop a state system-level learning outcomes assessment model to be pilot tested with the assessment of student work drawn from all participating state higher education institutions. Over the course of a year, the group worked collaboratively to develop a model for system-wide learning outcomes assessment and a plan for pilot testing the model. Financial support was provided through a subcontract to SHEEO from AAC&U's GEMS/VALUE project sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Individual campuses in each of the 9 states chose to participate in the MSC pilot with the goal of collecting learning outcomes data from their students in a consistent manner that would allow for benchmarking student outcomes on their campus relative to student performance on other campuses.

The model for demonstrating the attainment of student learning outcomes developed by the MSC Working Group deliberately avoided the use of standardized tests, in favor of assessing student work generated within the college curriculum, in part to insure that students were more likely to be motivated and engaged with the work being assessed. The assessment of this work was based on the AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise Essential (LEAP) Learning Outcomes and Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Rubrics, and relied on trained faculty assessment of course-embedded student written work. Of the 16 Essential Learning Outcomes, the collaborating states agreed that quantitative literacy and written

communication would be assessed by all institutions participating in the pilot study and that critical thinking would be optional. Each participating campus had a designated campus leader and the project engaged hundreds of faculty within each state in local activities to build institutional capacity to assess and improve student learning.

For the pilot study, a minimum of three 2-year institutions and three 4-year institutions per state were identified for participation in the pilot study. States with higher education systems composed of fewer than three 2- and/or 4- year campuses were exempt from this minimum requirement. For the 2014/2015 MSC pilot study, the population from which student artifacts were drawn for assessment included those students nearing graduation as measured by credit completion. The eligible student population included those students who had completed a minimum of 75% of the total credits required for graduation at the start of the fall semester 2014. Faculty members at participating institutions were asked to submit student work products to be assessed using the appropriate VALUE Rubric. Recognizing not all assignments would be well-suited for assessment against all dimensions (criteria) of the appropriate VALUE Rubric, faculty were asked to complete an assignment cover sheet that indicated which dimensions of the appropriate VALUE Rubric their assignment was designed to address. Faculty were encouraged to submit assignments that addressed as many of the VALUE Rubric dimensions for a specific student learning outcome as appropriate to allow for a more comprehensive measure of students' competency levels for each learning outcome. A list of broad assignment parameters were provided to assist faculty in assignment design and to ensure the appropriateness of assignments for assessment using the VALUE Rubrics.

Participating institutions were asked to collect a minimum of 75-100 artifacts per outcome. Pilot study campuses were given flexibility in how they chose to generate their samples. Each campus or consortium was responsible for developing its own sampling plan following a set of agreed upon parameters intended to increase the likelihood of capturing a representative sample of student work from the campus. The sampling plans were reviewed and necessary revisions recommended by the MSC Sampling Subgroup. The institution lead and/or other specified individuals oversaw the collection of the student work and the corresponding assignment instructions, assignment cover sheet and assignment supplementary information. At the institution level, all identifying information that would allow an assignment and the related documents to be linked to a faculty member, specific course or student was removed and a unique identifier assigned before the documents were uploaded at the state and multi-state level, maintaining anonymity with respect to the student, faculty member and course. Institutions also uploaded a corresponding file containing anonymized student demographic information (CSV file) linked to each artifact.

Student work products were housed in the VALUE Database and managed by TaskStream, the MSC's assessment management system. Scorers accessed these student work products remotely through this system to complete their rating work. Scoring of student artifacts – student work products – was undertaken by institutional faculty and staff selected from pilot study participating institutions. Each participating pilot study institution was asked to identify two to three individuals to serve as project-level scorers. MSC scorers included both full-time and part-time faculty members, professional staff and administrators from participating institutions. All scorers were required to participate in a national rubric training event held in Kansas City, MO on February 18 – 19, 2015. Scorers were blind to the student, faculty, course, institution and state the student work came from and were excluded from assessing student artifacts originating from their own institution. Each scorer was expected to score 75 – 100 artifacts for a specific learning outcome.

Assessment results for campuses were aggregated at the multi-state level by segments of similar public institutions (2-year and 4-year) for all dimensions of the VALUE rubric associated with each learning outcome. A total of 7,215 artifacts were collected from 53 institutions (29 2-year and 24 4-year). Institutional leads were encouraged to participate in a webinar reviewing the process for analyzing and interpreting institutional data, and the data was provided to the institution leads in both Excel and SPSS format. Individual campuses were provided with an overview of the aggregate benchmarks along with the data for student artifacts from their own institution. In addition, SPSS syntax examples were provided to institutions to allow for easier analysis of the data. Results were also analyzed by the MSC as part of their consideration of proof of concept, feasibility, validity and reliability for the model. As campuses continue to participate over subsequent years, the model design could provide meaningful longitudinal information to participating institutions and states about strengths and weaknesses in student learning. As an initial pilot, the project focused on demonstrating that collecting and analyzing this data could help each institution and state advance the learning and success of their students.